

FIRST THINGS FIRST

AN INTRODUCTION TO InSITE97

Two elements make inSITE97 truly important. First: it presents art outside of its usual contexts, such as galleries and museums. Second: it encourages the idea that where the art is -- the "site" -- should determine what the art is.

In combination, these elements present a profound challenge to the fundamental tenets of Modern Art; most particularly, to the idea of "art for art's sake."

The character of this challenge is evident in the difference of experience encountered by an artist who contemplates doing a work at a site in "the real world," versus an artist who goes into a studio and confronts a blank canvas.

Because the real world is nothing like a studio, and no place on earth is anything like a blank canvas, the rules, and the outcome for art, have to be different.

InSITE97, with many works by many artists at many locations, explores the implications and possibilities this new paradigm opens.

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

The exhibition's title, "inSITE97," makes clever use of the term "sitework," a word which came into use in the artworld in the late 1960s to describe the efforts of artists who would do things like dig a trench in the desert, pile rocks in a lake, and erect steel poles in the middle of a prairie to attract lightning.

The term proved useful partly because of its somewhat snooty suggestion that the art was happening "off-site;" i.e. not in a gallery or museum. More importantly, though, it also acknowledged that, with this art, the site and the art are inseparable.

A related term, "installation," came into use at roughly the same time, probably borrowed from existing artworld practice which speaks, for example, of "installing" an exhibition. Applied to art, then, the term describes works that are made either to fit into a space, like a carpet fits into a room; or to occupy a space, like a room's furnishings, decor, paintings, etc..

As this suggests, "installation" describes works in which the space is largely a passive participant in the art. As a result, this art can usually be picked-up, transported to another space, reconfigured to fit the new situation, and remain essentially unchanged.

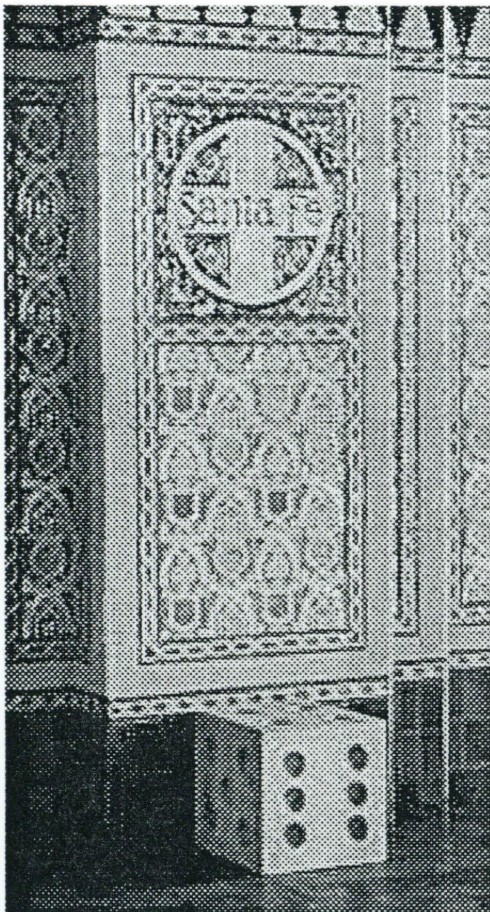
Art of this type is widely seen in, and widely embraced by, contemporary museums and galleries. There, all those who come upon this work, having chosen to be in the museum or gallery, already know that what they're seeing is "art," even if they don't understand or like what they see.

In contrast, an artist creating a work at a site outside of this context cannot assume that people will make any connection at all between the work and "art." Most people in "the real world" have never given art a second thought, let alone a first one. Yet these are the people whose world siteworks chose to enter.

ART HERE *AND* THERE

Iran Do Espirito Santo, Liz Magor,
Thomas Glassford

The possibility of placing similar objects at a number of different sites, as a way to bind together far flung locations, proved irresistible to a number of inSITE artists. While the idea has merit, the problem with the works of this type in inSITE97 is that something which isn't particularly worthwhile in one location is not made more worthwhile by being in many locations.



Iran Do Espirito produced ten cement replicas of dice and placed one at the Santa Fe Depot, one at the CECUT, one at the Children's Museum, one at the ReinCarnation Building, etc. etc. At most of these locations, besides being shyly displayed, the dice aren't large enough or colorful enough to stand out and be noticed. Not being noticed, they have no impact.

and why dice?

ART AT THE BORDER

works by
Louis Hock, Marcos Ramirez ERRE,
Fernando Arias

A site is not only its physical characteristics, but its subjective associations as well. Nowhere within the domain of inSITE are these associations more apparent and troubled than at the U.S. / Mexico border.

Thanks to the attitudes, aesthetics, and resources of the American government, a steel fence now occupies this line. While not quite the Berlin Wall, the tensions it reflects and provokes are not all that different.

With such heavy subjective loading, any artist working at a site on this line will have to deal with these realities.



The border fence begins and ends in the ocean, whose waters pay no attention to it whatsoever.

To the north of this spot, on top of the seaside bluff where the fence gets its first good grip on land, lies Border Field State Park, with its lush green lawns, well kept restrooms, and ever present Border Patrolman.

To the south is Playas de Tijuana, with its bull ring and stucco structures glowing all white in the sun. No equivalent patrolman stands watch here.

Louis Hock's work at this location consists of the seemingly simple and civic minded act of constructing a fountain. Its water comes from an aquifer 1000 feet below ground and spreading for several hundred feet on either side of the border. In order to serve people on both sides of the border with this water that comes from both sides of the border, he must split the fountain in two; thanks, of course, to the fence.

Sipping from the fountain, from whatever side, one's eyes become aligned with a small hole the artist has cut into the fence. Through this hole, one sees the identical fountain on the other side.

With the fence and its meanings so close to one's eyes and psyche, it's very easy to imagine that anyone drinking from the fountain on the other side must be "the enemy."

On the other hand, if one recognizes a friend there, it comes as a shock to recognize that it takes nearly an hour's drive to get around the fence to visit this friend, who is otherwise only a foot away. (You could try to swim a short distance out to sea to get around the fence, but you'd get arrested, at least if you were trying it from south to north.)

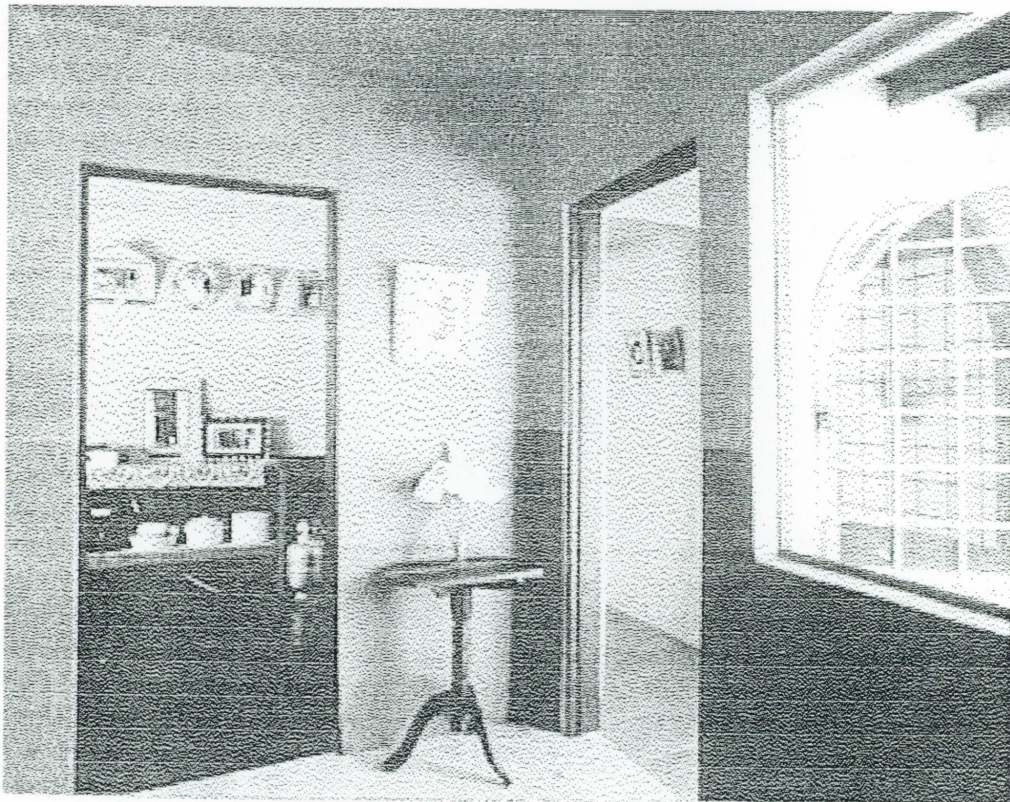
ART ON THE HILL

work by
Patricia Patterson

For inSITE97, the curators selected the artists, then the artists selected the sites where they'd work. Many chose sites in the cultural sector; at places such as museums and the like. Others chose sites in the public sector -- i.e. parks, government facilities, and transit depots. A few picked sites in the commercial sector, working at places such as stores and restaurants.

Only one artist sought out a site in the largest sector of them all: the private sector. This is something of a surprise because people's homes are one of art's natural resting places; at least for paintings and sculptures.

By entering this world through the perspective of inSITE, with its emphasis on cross-influence between the site and the art, the terms of the relationship between art and the house it's in changes radically...

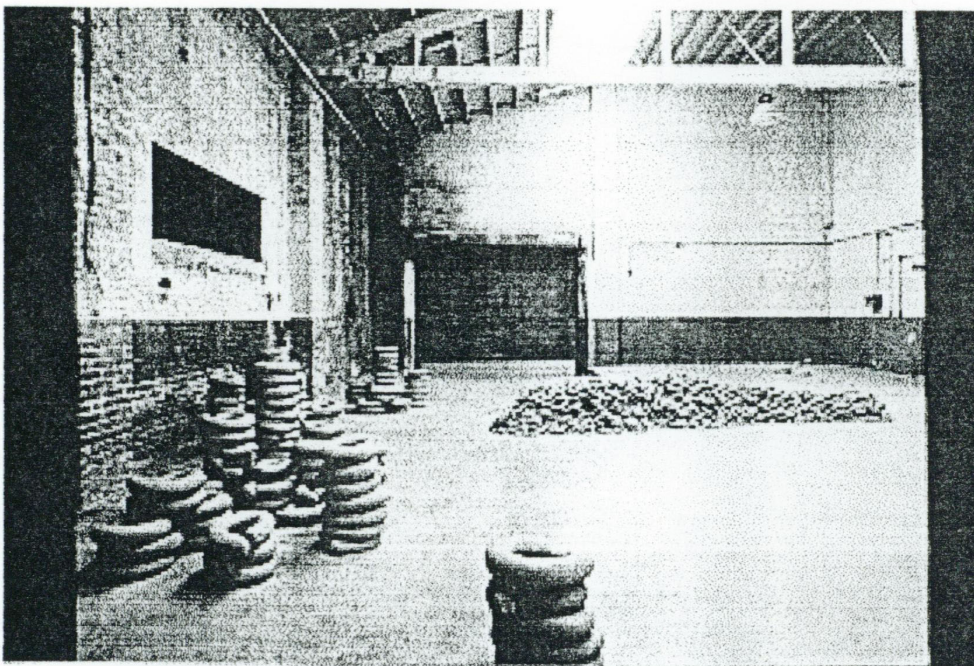


Patricia Patterson's site consists of three small rooms attached to the home of Marcia and Hector Nunez. Built by Marcia's family in the early 1950s,

ART UNDER THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

works by
Anna Maria Maiolino, Gonzalo Diaz

At the Children's Museum, in downtown San Diego, you would expect to find inSITE's artists presenting works that have something to do with children. Strangely, this is not the case at all.



Anna Maria Maiolino's "There Could Be More of These" hints at a chance to play around a bit because it consists entirely of clay — hundreds of coils of it varyingly arrayed in piles and rows in a huge space divided from the main part of the

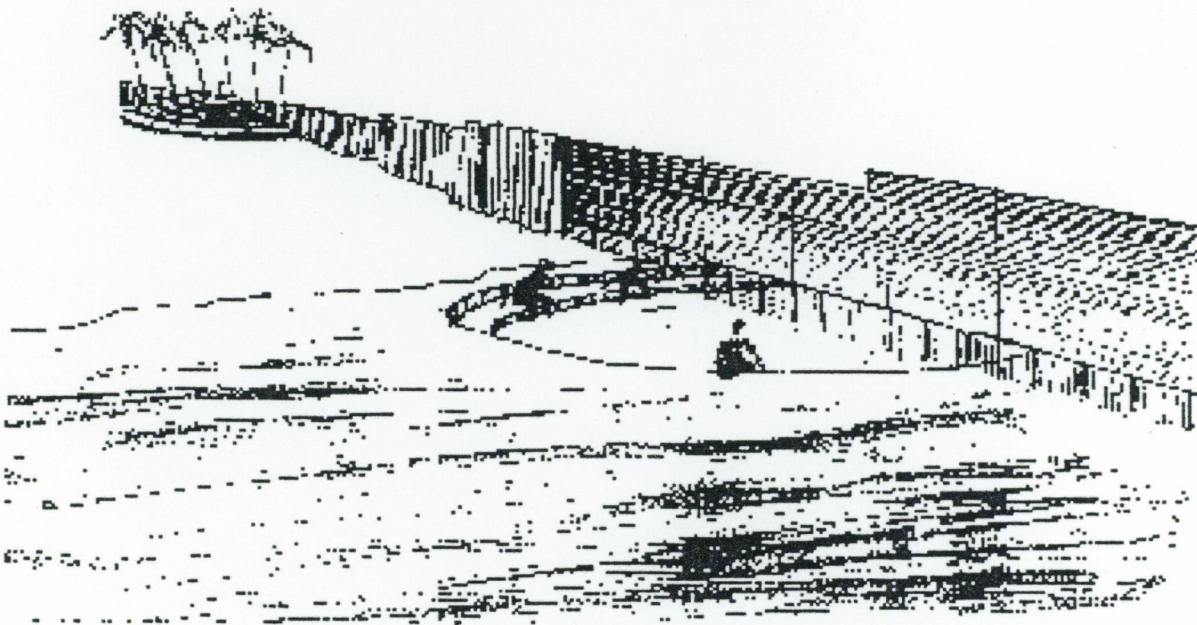
museum by a large pane of glass. Given its visibility from the museum's front door, it's easy to imagine kids using that clay to make dinosaurs and penguins and the like. But the children at the Children's Museum can't touch the stuff. This is art that's formally dressed, and it doesn't like to get mussed-up.

The work's pedigree originates in gestural Abstract Expressionism, which produced some of the best painting of the century. Here, however, the style is played out in sculptural terms; with the clay substituting for paint and the room substituting for the canvas. Unfortunately, the hard physical realities of the three-dimensional world and the inconvenience of gravity conspire to doom most attempts at gestural sculpture to rigidity and

Works In Progress and In Conclusion

As a triannual exhibition, InSITE is inherently a work in progress, with its next manifestation scheduled for 2000. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that InSITE97 should come to an end with two of its works also deemed "in progress."

Vito Acconci's "Island on the Fence" consists of a simple but pleasing shape situated in the water at the very end of the border fence. Its form is mirrored by an identical shape dug out of the land on the shore. The island element will appear to change in size and shape; disappearing and reappearing as the tides and waves reveal more and less of its mass



However wonderful a thing it would be to see, the proposal faced a struggle to receive official approval; no doubt because its site is so politically sensitive and emotionally charged.

From the point of view of officialdom, it looked like what, in law, is called an "attractive nuisance."

ART THAT'S ART INSPITE OF ITS SITE

works by
Deborah Small, Ruben Ortiz

Far more than is the case with museum and gallery exhibitions, inSITE97 exposes the demands that artworks make on the contexts where they're presented; not just in physical objective terms, but in subjective terms as well. These demands have to be recognized and addressed.

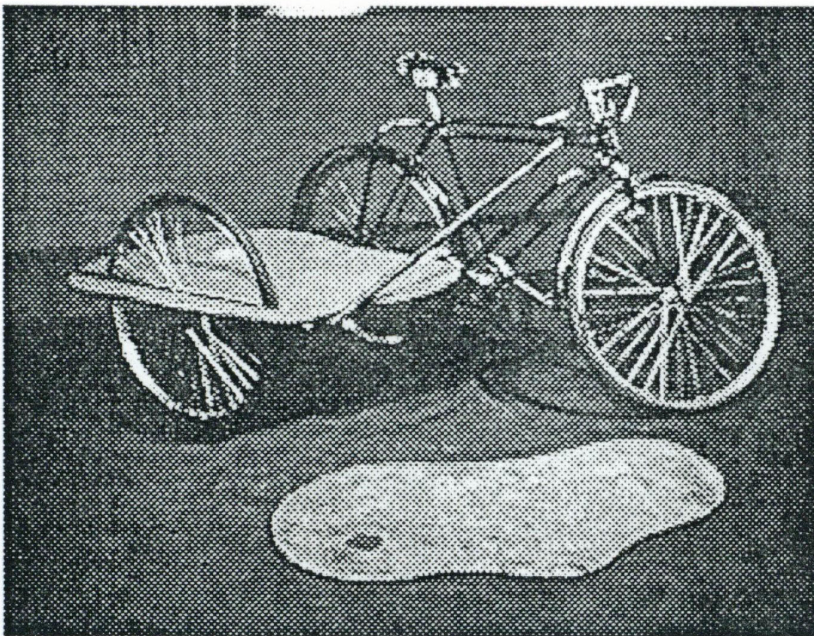
Just because a work can fit into a space -- or can be made to fit into it -- doesn't automatically mean it's a good idea to put it there.

Temptation can also arise when a particular work is so compelling that a space simply must be found for it, so it can lend its strengths to the exhibition as a whole.

Neither of these scenarios produce ideal results; and good works suffer as a result of the compromises made.

Liz Magor's "Blue Students" are more noticeable and even more ubiquitous than Do Espirito's dice. The work consists of hundreds of photographs of high school students on both sides of the border. These are printed on emulsion-coated glass which is then mounted over black paper. The images that result seem more suggestive of a funeral for victims of a bus crash than of young people being young people. These inexplicably dour images, more black looking than the blue of the title, appear in small groups at many of inSITE's venues; apparently anywhere there was room for them.

San Diego has one of the highest ratios of golf courses to humans of any city in the world. This fact seems to have inspired Thomas Glassford's "City of



Greens/Cuidad De Los Greens." Touched more by whimsy than by wisdom, the work offers various interpretations of a putting-green motif, all of them prominently featuring the fake plastic "grass" known as Astroturf.

These constructions appear at several of inSITE locations, where they might provoke a smile and provide some welcome relief from the more weighty pieces with which they share space.

This contribution of a sense of humor is the work's greatest contribution. Its refusal, or inability, to deal with the issues of why and how this man-made greenery exists in the middle of a nature-made desert is the work's greatest disappointment.

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In this way, by provoking personal experiences and realizations, Hock's fountain engages all of the troubles of the border situation without specifically referring to any of them.

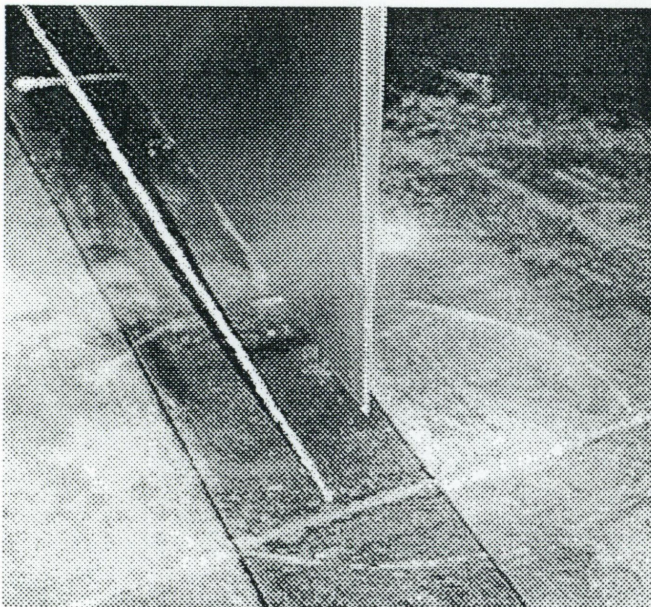
Marcos Ramirez ERRE's evocation of the Trojan Horse stands at one of the busiest international crossings in the world, a couple of hundred feet away from the line of the border itself, and fully on the Mexican side.

Perhaps attempting to appear even-handed about matters, he has constructed a two-headed, bi-directional horse. This gesture is misplaced, however, because only the United States perceives itself to be under attack; and only the U.S. which takes extraordinary measures to keep people out.



The work also suffers for an ailment common to most outdoor art in most locations: it's dwarfed by its surroundings. (A fact which is disguised by the positioning of the camera which took this picture.)

These complaints aside, "Toy and Horse," as ERRE calls the work, should be kept in mind for a possible future in which relations between Mexico and the U.S. are as untroubled as those between the U.S. and Canada. In such a future, it would be wonderful to see a work like this constructed at ten times its current size and placed directly astride the border, as a reminder of troubles now past.



At the ReinCarnation Building, in a damp basement space, Fernando Arias combines polished steel panels with the rusted jagged steel of the border fence to construct a huge razor blade. Surrounded by darkness, it hovers like a massive guillotine above a row of mirrors. Atop the mirrors rests a slender line of white powder.

While readable as an evocation of the border's physical characteristics, the work is far more powerful as a greatly magnified image of a detail universally associated with the use of cocaine.

No judgment seems to be made here concerning such use. Instead, the focus seems to be on the effect that the reaction to drug use, embodied in the War On Drugs, has had on the border experience -- making it more secretive, more intense, more heavily armed, and more menacing.

The piece could be in many locations, in many conditions of space and lighting, and

the house sits on a hillside in Colonia Altamira, a pleasant but somewhat ramshackle neighborhood of old Tijuana.

Patterson and her assistants transformed the site in such a way that entering it feels like walking into a painting; a fulfillment of the idea of painting as "a window to another world."

The primary tool of this transformation is color -- reds, blues, greens, yellows; all of them highly excited hues which are readily available at paint stores south of the border, but nearly impossible to find in the more (evidently) color-anxious north.

Color is everywhere. Outside, on the exterior walls, the picket fence, and the window trim; and inside, on the interior walls, the floor, the furnishings and fabrics Patterson selected for the space, and in the paintings she created to hang within the space. The colors' potentially aggravating intensity is masterfully balanced and the decorative elements are sufficiently few, so there's never a sensation of chaos or distraction.

Movement through the space, from room to room, and from detail to detail, yields a series of snapshot views, each of which suggests itself as the subject of a still life or domestic genre scene.

What Patterson presents at this site is not the confrontation with social and political issues that flavors most of InSITE's offerings, but a warm and appreciative embrace of life lived simply and with modest means.

Because of its unique location and its permanence, the work raises some unlikely and intriguing questions. For example, what impact is the work having in and on its community, which never for a moment imagined anyone spending so much time, attention, and resources making a house look all but perfect? Will neighbors take a cue from Pattern's work and attempt to "upgrade" their properties to this very sophisticated level? If they don't, which is likely, doesn't the work then remain merely the peculiarity that most art is in most people's eyes?

More generally, if art is going to claim a place for itself in residential neighborhoods, should museums open satellite branches in the converted garages and spare bedrooms of people's homes?

All of which raises the more fundamental question, inherent throughout InSITE97: Where does art belong?

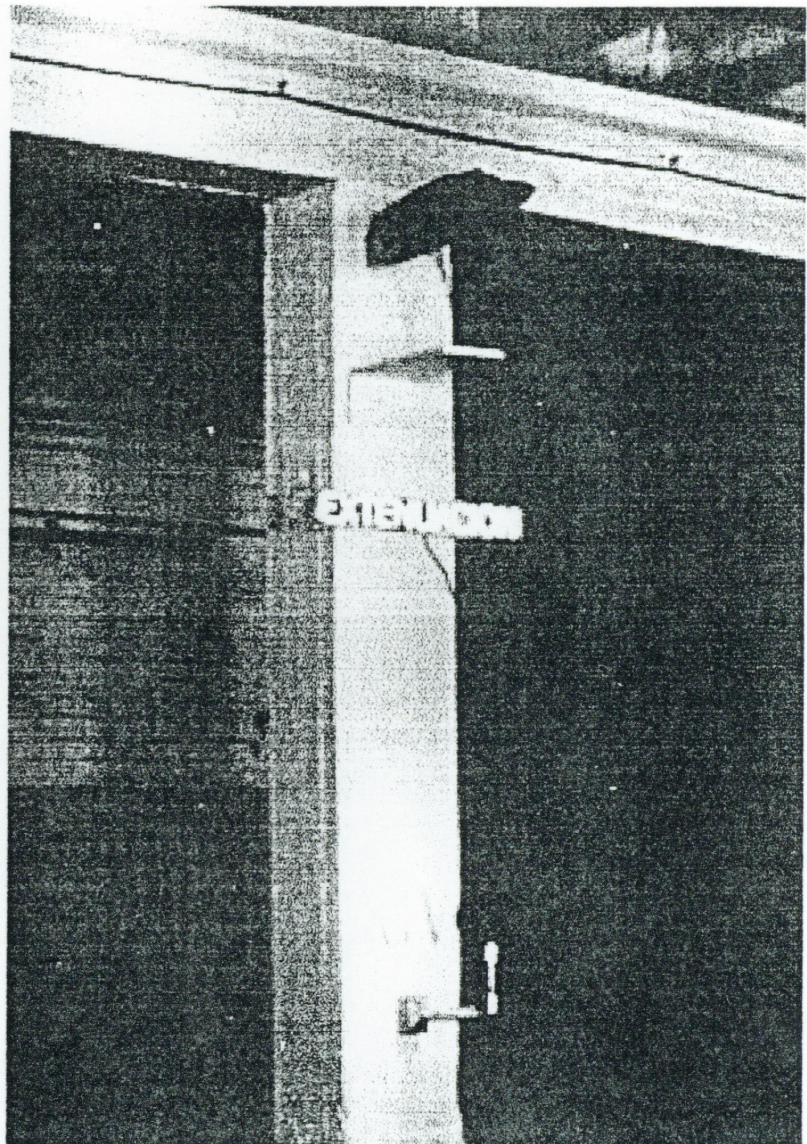
weightiness. "There Could Be More of These" does not escape this fate.

In formal terms, and as a sitework, the piles' relationship to the space they're in seems arbitrary. The same coils of clay -- more or less of them -- could be transported to a differently proportioned space, differently arrayed according to the character of that space, and the piece would be essentially the same.

And what of this clay? Is it the earth under our feet, the ground we walk and drive upon pursuing inSITE97, now made art? If it were, this fact would bind the work to its site in at least one meaningful and interesting way. But there's no indication that this is the case, leaving the work neither meaningful nor interesting.

Just a few steps away, however, is a very meaningful and interesting piece that benefits very much from the characteristics of its site: Gonzalo Diaz' "The Way of the Cross."

A vital element of Christian iconography. "The Way" consist of 14 distinct scenes representing specific incidents during Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. In Roman Catholicism, these events are the focus of worship and appear in forms ranging from highly detailed paintings and sculptures to simple Roman numerals placed on the columns or walls of churches



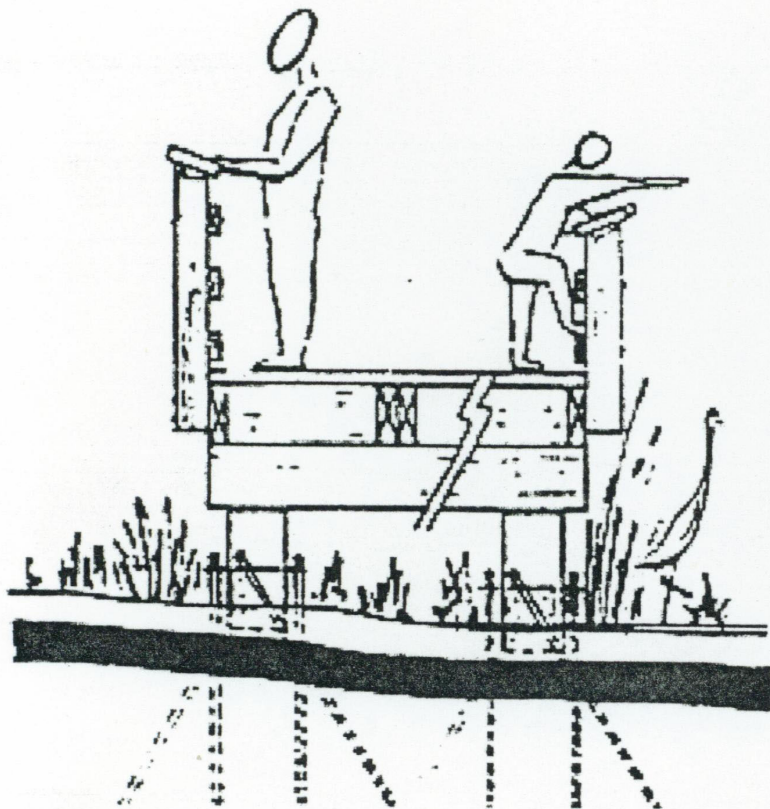
No doubt, the supporting columns in a large, lightless room under the Children's Museum, inspired Diaz' effort. Within the space are a total of 21 columns, arranged in three rows of seven. By using two of these rows,

The "attractive" aspects of the piece are evident from the sketch.

The "nuisance" aspects are what the U.S. Border Patrol perceives. They will have to keep track of who swims out to the island from their side of the fence, and thus is welcome to swim back; and who is on the island from the other side of the fence, and thus a potential illegal enterer. Adding to the challenge is the fact that few swimmers carry passports or other means of identification.

Like Louis Hock's fountain at this location, Acconci's proposal engages considerations that have nothing to do with the piece as a physical thing. It's the site that gives it added dimension and richness.

(As things currently stand, "Island on the Fence" is scheduled to start construction in May, 1998)



David Avalos' site consists of a raised walkway that meanders through a nature preserve that's surrounded by city. The walkway's worthy and important purpose is to serve as an educational resource for children -- "a site for the study of poetry and visual art, biology, ecology, and geography," according to the civic and private groups behind the project's creation.

For his part, Avalos will help design the panels of text and image that will be placed at key points along the walkway. He will also develop a variety of thematically relevant decorative elements to embellish the walkways "architecture."

Significantly, Avalos' role here is quite unlike what he encounters in his studio, where he is responsible for every aspect and element of what he creates. Here, much of what people experience on the walkway will be the



At the Santa Fe Depot, in a place that's always in a hurry, Deborah Small has created a space where people need to slow down if they're going to appreciate the rich experience the artist offers in "Rowing in Eden."

The work occupies a street-facing room formerly used for baggage claim. Now, it's bedecked with flowers, branches, and reeds; most of these herbs and medicinals, and many of them grown by the artist in northern San Diego County. Music,

sounds from nature, and the voices of women drift through the space, telling of the role of plants in the lives of women in other times and other cultures; and of the persecution as "witches" this sometimes brought.

The work's depth and complexity, however, stand in stark contrast to its environment at the train depot. Too many people pass right by it, closed-off to distractions (however inviting they might be) and swept along by the tides of desire to get somewhere else. While this kind of energy is particularly intense at a train depot, few environments in "the real world" are entirely free from it.

In "the art world," by contrast, a leisurely pace and an openness to new experience (i.e. curiosity) are part of what people willingly bring to the door. Because it requires this quality of attention, a work like "Rowing in Eden" makes more sense in art's world than on the street.

Even so, "Rowing in Eden" is powerful work, one of the most thoroughly researched and meticulously crafted in all of inSITE97. Its offering of a too rare glimpse into the feminine experience of the spiritual and the mystical is effective and important.

the artist has the number he needs for "The Stations."

At the foot of each of the columns, dimly illuminated by a clip-on lamp, is a polished steel roman numeral between I and XIV

At eye level, in deep blue neon tube shaped like handwriting, are fourteen words, one on each column, and all in Spanish: *synecdoque, enfasis, catacrexis, antonomasia, hiperbaton, metafora, eufemismo, apostrofe, elipsis, metonimia, oximoron, hiperbole, enigma, extenuacion.*

The English equivalents of these words; all of which come from the domain of rhetoric; are easily found without recourse to a bi-lingual dictionary. *Metonimia*, for example, is *metonymy* in English, and refers to a figure of speech that uses the name of one thing to represent another thing which it suggests. This is how sense can be made of the statement: "*The pen* (suggesting literature) *is mightier than the sword* (suggesting force)."

These terms describe, and expose, various mechanisms by which words create meaning and thereby shape people's thoughts and experience. Generally speaking, religions, especially fundamentalist religions, don't welcome the application of this analytic perspective to their statements of faith.

Because of this, Diaz' work can seem iconoclastic, even blasphemous. But the work also projects a certain spiritual, or at least meditational quality; due in part to the darkness, warmth and quiet of the space, and to the gentle symmetry of the softly illuminated elements within it.

The result is a visually, intellectually, and emotionally satisfying work; made possible by its site, with its twenty-one columns arranged in three rows of seven.

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work of others -- engineers, ecologists, geographers, biologists, educators, etc. -- none of whom are artists.

Although artists working with and within pre-existing conditions is the central idea of InSITE, this is an altogether different situation because the walkway had no prior existence. So the opportunity was there to engage with art from the beginning.

Avalos, a powerful artist who is well versed in the complexities of collaborative efforts, is quite capable of leading a project like this from its beginnings, rather than being brought in at the end to provide an artistic touch.

If that touch had been part of the project's evolution from the first, the entire outcome might have been "art," rather than something with art on it.

The absense of this thought in the minds of the walkway's originators demonstrates the breadth of the gulf that separates "the real world" from "the art world," and from what art is capable of at the end of the 20th Century.

Bridging this gulf, or trying to, is InSITE's most important work.

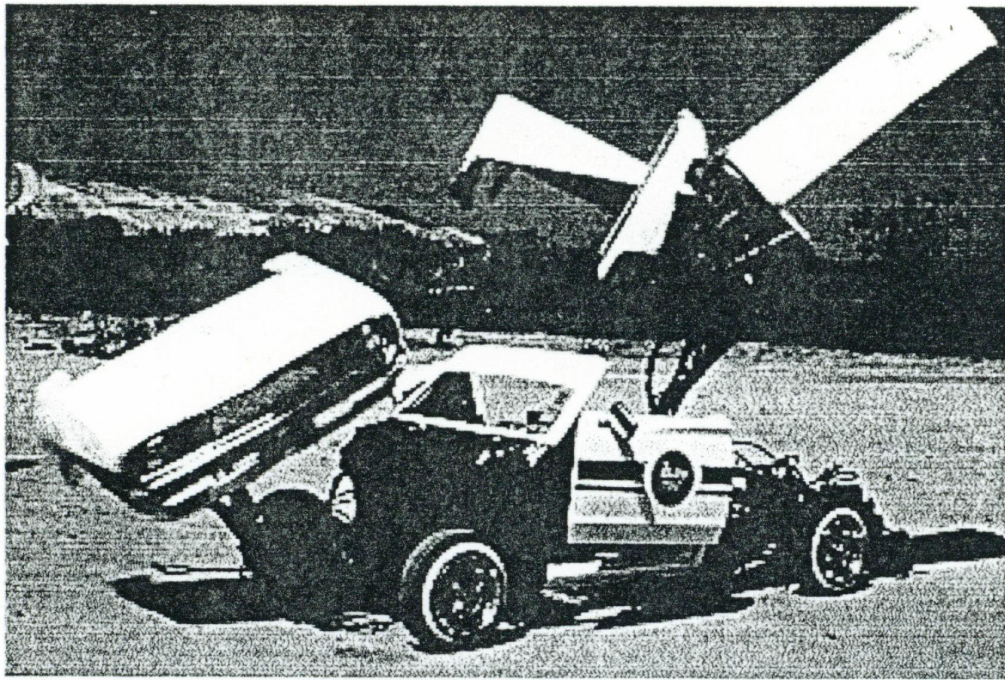
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Ruben Ortiz
Torres' "Alien
Toy UCO
(Unidentified
Cruising Object)"
pre-dates the
start-up of inSITE
97, so it's clear
that a place was
made for it,
rather than it
being made for a
place.

To accommodate
inSITE's

programmatic expectations, a slide projector was incorporated into the form to project images against the wall. Only by the narrowest of threads does this bind the work to its context and result in a "sitework."

The work doesn't need this treatment, however, nor does it need the mock Border Patrol emblems on its doors. The message these emblems pound out is inferable enough from the work's evident roots in lowrider culture, a distinctly urban Chicano pop form.

Torres' creation partially alienates itself from this tradition by the fact that you can't get in and cruise the boulevard, a key part of the lowrider experience. Interestingly, this makes the work all the more like "high art," rather than the "folk art" of the lowrider, because one of art's essential characteristics is its utter inutility.

Minus its distractions, and even with them, "Alien Toy ..." is a superb piece of sculpture, comparable in attitude and expression to the best works of Mark DiSuvero.

It's more than strong enough to stand on it own; which it should, as art pure and simple.